

# the artful DESIGNER

» CHRIS HADDAD BRINGS TO LIFE THE MODERN  
DESIGNS OF SOME OF THE NORTHWEST'S MOST DESIRABLE  
HOMES—WHEN HE'S NOT MAKING SCULPTURES.

On a Monday morning during the last big push before the Christmas holiday, Chris Haddad leaves his West Seattle home in the predawn darkness for an early flight to Oakland. From the airport, he makes the 90-minute drive to a multimillion-dollar hacienda sprawling on a fecund hilltop in the renowned wine-growing region of Sonoma, California. The house is the fledgling manifestation of several years' worth of a client's dreams, a designer's vision, and a colossal investment—in creative energy and dollars—by both. As the project architect for this home, Haddad is responsible for making it happen. Its design has graduated from a gauzy, schematic phase during which the building's shape and layout were determined. Haddad has since shepherded it through countless stages of refinement, from generating construction drawings—structural, plumbing, and ventilation specifications—on down to approving the final coat of paint.

Haddad's professional portfolio as an associate with Suyama Peterson Deguchi puts him at the helm of the firm's most complicated and ambitious residential commissions with the highest price tags. Two recent projects include a modern interpretation of a large Irish farmhouse estate, built of imported Chinese stone, on a Medina waterfront; and a 3,400-square-foot Seattle home of sculpted concrete, cedar, and glass that transitions into a private golf course.

Since George Suyama began his practice in 1971, his firm has been lauded by colleagues and his international portfolio has collected numerous awards and accolades. Haddad joined

by PETER SACKETT  
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Art and design George and Laurie Schuchart's  
AIA Award-winning Broadmoor home  
combines Haddad's two passions



**One with nature** (Above) Suyama Peterson Deguchi strove to integrate the Schucharts' interiors with the exterior elements. (Opposite) Chris Haddad creates in his workshop, shaping a new sculpture in his Hullis series.

Suyama's staff a decade ago, and, at 39, has gained enough experience and wisdom to direct his own practice. But Haddad is a top-drawer architect who prefers to work from the middle tier.

Tall, rangy, and gray beyond his years, Haddad compresses a full week of work into 30 intense hours at his Belltown office, operating at a frenetic pace that would confound most architects. As a project architect, he conjures reality from inspiration while figuring out how all of the pieces fit together. "In terms of a gross analogy," he says, "I'm the quarterback and George is the coach.... George might

say, 'Look at the site for this house and figure out how the topography will work with the grading to get the driveway up to it.'" In addition to being the primary contact between Suyama and the client, Haddad is also responsible for evaluating zoning restrictions and code requirements, managing fees and budgets, weaving together work and delivery schedules, selecting the contractors, monitoring

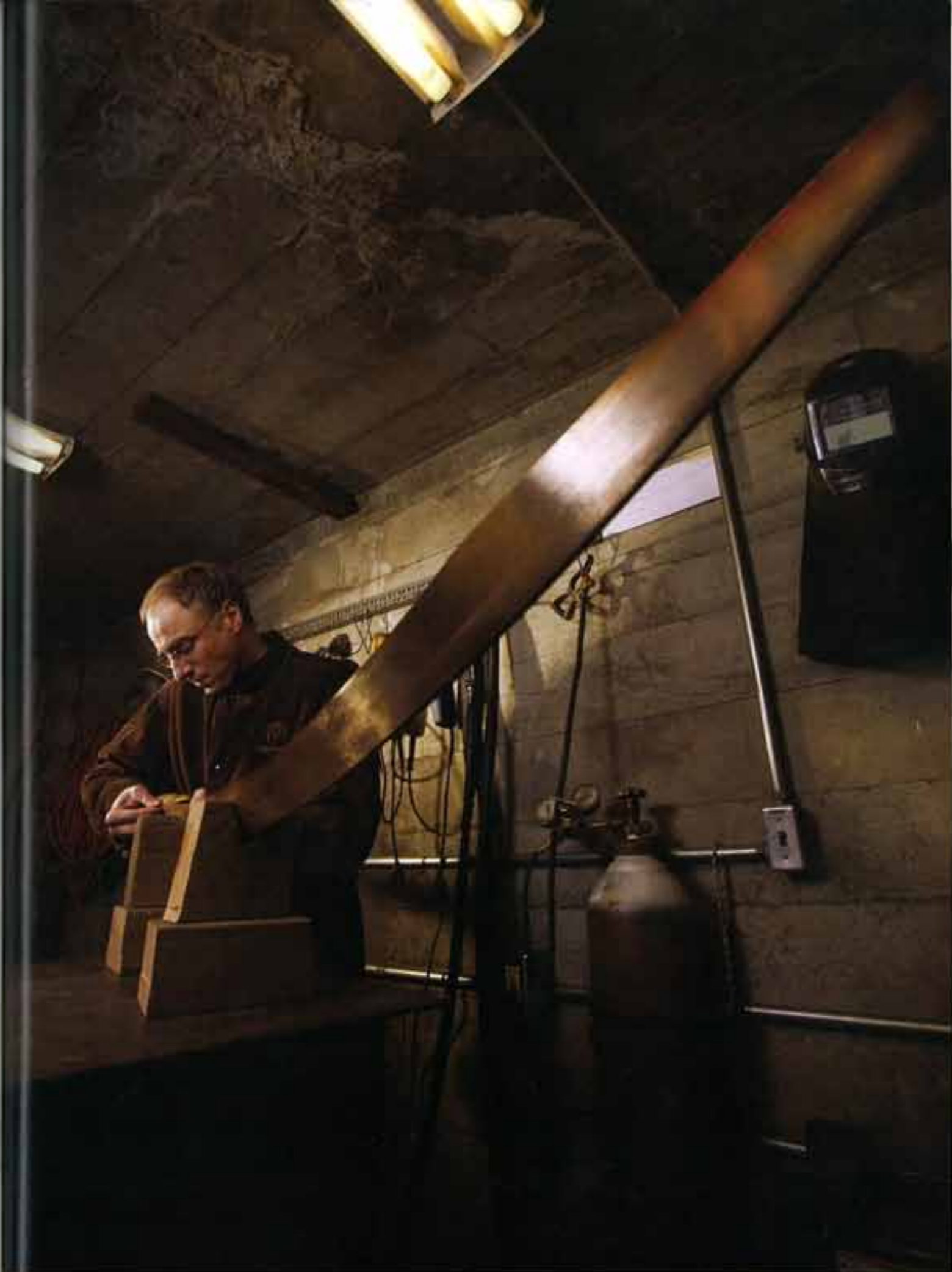
**"I DON'T FEEL PRODUCTIVE UNLESS I'M MAKING SOMETHING WITH MY HANDS," HADDAD SAYS, "CREATING SOMETHING AND CRAVING TO SEE HOW IT WILL WORK OUT."**

their work, composing progress reports—and resolving any problems along the way. On a single project, this process can last years. It is stressful, exhausting work, but Haddad prefers the front line to a corner office.

"The most fulfilling thing is watching this space you've designed take shape," Haddad says. "It's exciting when you finally stand in what you helped envision and create."

As a child in Boston, Haddad loved to draw. He was heavily influenced by time spent sailing with his mother and father, and boats became a frequent subject of his drawings. Feeling some parental pressure to direct his creative impulses toward employability, he toyed with becoming a naval architect but found there was a limited demand for such services. As an undergraduate at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, Haddad drifted back toward his early passion. "I was taking physics and math classes, thinking I was going to be an architect or an engineer, but the art just kept pulling me." A teacher introduced Haddad to sculpture and he declared an art major in his sophomore year. But he still worried about making a living. "Even though physics and calculus were painful for me," he says, "I eventually decided, 'All right, I'm going to go on to architecture school.'" When he enrolled in graduate studies at Syracuse University ("It was an awful town, but they had a great architecture program"), the rigors of design education left no time for sculpture. "Architecture school is brutal," he says. "Professors would take the models you'd worked on for weeks, rip them apart, and put them back together their own way. Students would cry."

Haddad persevered and, after graduating, moved to Seattle in 1994 in pursuit of a relationship that eventually fizzled. But he enjoyed the contrast between New England and the Pacific Northwest; his new city struck him as "young and energized with lots of creative people," and he soon took a job as a draftsman in Ben Trogdon's firm. "He didn't have much experience at that point," Trogdon says, "but I saw a good creative mind. I had him assembling construction documents, learning how to get projects built, and he was exemplary—like a sponge drinking in all he could. It's rare that someone can sustain that kind of energy and devotion after spending so many





hours in a design office." But the attraction Haddad felt to sculpture was too much to marginalize, so he quit and made a bargain with himself on the spot. "I decided I was going to spend time with sculpture," Haddad says. "But I would also send my résumé to the only four design offices doing work that got my attention. If they weren't interested, I'd just work on sculpture and find a job when I needed more money.... I was kind of hoping I wouldn't get an offer."

It was a bold and charming plan, but Haddad's days as an architect had just begun. Suyama Peterson Deguchi was one of the firms he had solicited—and they were hiring immediately.

"We were very busy," says architect Jay Deguchi, "and we needed someone to crank out detailed drawings in a hurry." "And without a whole bunch of supervision," adds George Suyama. "We'd seen his portfolio and the drawings he'd accomplished for Ben's office and felt confident he'd be able to do that."

It was trial by fire, but Haddad performed so well that his

**The art of war** George and Laurie Schuchart bought a piece from Haddad's Weapons series, which hangs prominently beside a fireplace (above). Haddad's sketches (bottom) reveal the evolution of his sculptures.

workload never slackened, and today, a decade later, the partners continue to send him into the fray.

Back on that hilltop in Sonoma, Haddad spends the first hour of his day "walking the site," and chewing absentmindedly on a sandwich he'd bought en route. Wearing his standard attire of black pullover sweater, gray trousers, and snub-nosed black leather shoes ("I hate shopping"), his trim silhouette moves around the busy workmen and through the emerging structure, still in the framing stage and rising among grapevines and old, multitrunked oak trees. He keeps to the periphery of the action for the time being, using these quiet moments to take mental notes of what has changed—for better or for worse—since his last visit. Transcribing these on paper, he prepares for an afternoon that includes checklist meetings with the subcontractors and craftsmen. He'll then visit his room only to drop off his bags and prepare for a working dinner with the clients. The day ends shortly after the meal, back at his room where he finally surrenders to fatigue. He'll rise early the next morning to discuss



further solutions and resolve remaining issues before flying back to Seattle and reporting his findings to the office.

It's not all good news. Haddad, whose eye is calibrated like a micrometer, notices a problem with the way an exposed wood beam meets the walls at either end. The plans called for a small reveal consisting, in this case, of a narrow gap between each end of the beam and the face of the sheetrock wall. The resulting intersection appears crisp and visually distinct when done correctly. Haddad spots that the reveal measures one-eighth of an inch at one end and three-eighths of an inch at the other. He speaks to the foreman, and suggests a solution—a visual one versus a structural one—that costs a small fraction of the thousands of dollars at stake. These types of issues are usually resolved without incident, but that isn't always the case.

Though he never relishes confrontations, Haddad isn't afraid to assert himself for the sake of his work. He recalls a project in which the contractor had completed a huge 20-foot-high section of concrete wall without installing the specified amount of reinforcing steel. He and

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the contractor hadn't gotten along well, and this would only increase the friction. "I told him it wasn't right; he'd have to tear it out," Haddad says. "It's hard, but it's part of the process. They have their pride too."

He has even been threatened with bodily harm, but not once has a builder walked away from a job following a flare-up. It's a testament to Haddad's diplomacy and levelheadedness. In fact, once he defuses the situation, builders often compliment Haddad's skills as an architect and project leader. "Chris is really the workhorse," says George Schuchart, an established Seattle contractor who has worked on projects for Suyama Peterson Deguchi. "He's the one who works out all of the details and does the administration of these complex designs. He's very careful, deliberate in his thinking, and calm under fire. When a problem arises in the field and you find Chris to discuss it, he's already drawing the solution. I have often wanted to take that drawing and frame it; it's always the perfect iteration of the issue at hand."

Haddad is quick to point out that architecture is a collaborative process, synthesizing and refining the skills and inspiration of dozens of people and countless hours of collective decision-making to arrive at the finished product. "There's this romantic idea about the architect being the one who designs and conceives of the whole thing," Haddad says, "but in reality there are so many people and elements involved—the client, contractors, consultants, building departments, suppliers, materials, not to mention our staff—and then all of the restrictions on what you can do with the land. We're always trying to make a site



better than it would be without any buildings on it," Haddad says, "and I think that's the struggle—enhancing the site and making it a better place...without ruining it."

His prowess didn't go unnoticed at his firm, either. "Just like all architects, the better they perform, the more work gets piled on them," Deguchi says. "Chris was made an associate because of his great capability. He pushes our work even further and takes a huge load off the office in terms of overseeing the project. He can move things from a sketchy schematic stage and just run with it, adding things to make it much better."

Until recently, Haddad's two chosen disciplines, art and architecture, were related but always at practical odds. Time was a nettlesome problem for him. About a year ago, he approached Suyama and Deguchi with a proposal to reduce his hours to leave more time for his art. "I don't feel productive unless I'm making something with my hands," Haddad says, "creating something and craving to see how it will work out."

That firm, whose Belltown office includes a small gallery dedicated to contemporary art, was open to Haddad's request. "The firm has always tried to support him—showing some of his pieces at our office, for example," Deguchi says. "We said 'Sure, that's fine.' He's very efficient and gets through a lot of work in a very short time. It's not something we could do for everyone, but Chris is very focused."

Just south of the West Seattle Bridge, in the chilly basement workshop of his 1915 wood-frame house near the Duwamish River, Haddad scrutinizes the surface of a long, dagger-shaped splinter of steel held fast by a pair of clamps on the worktable. He slowly shapes the starboard plinth of his latest sculpture, one of two conceptual, vaguely maritime pieces in a developing series he calls Hulls. He stands with his arms at his sides, clad in a heavy leather welding coat and boots, pockmarked and singed from hot flying metal. Concealed behind safety goggles and a respirator, Haddad's face is expressionless. This piece of metal is giving him trouble, refusing to maintain the precise shape he wants for more than a few passes of his arc-welding torch. He could have cast molten steel in a mold for an easier, faster result. But, as with his work as an architect, Haddad requires a tactile

relationship with raw materials and revels in the details of assembly.

"Hulls is what I call them, but I don't intend for them to represent only boat hulls. 'Hull' for me means many things. It's a sailing vessel, but it's also a space...it's our shelter on the water. And it's also an investigation of the line between the organic and the mechanical, and how humans are attracted to both."

Like an architect, this sculptor designs—thinks—by drawing. "It starts with sketching. I can't completely envision something without exploring it by drawing. It's the same with architecture; a moving pencil is your thinking tool. What's hard is that architecture is about making space as opposed to most art or sculpture, which is about making objects. That was the most difficult thing to get a grip on, and some architects don't ever really grasp that. The industry has many people trying to design beautiful objects instead of spaces and places."

Occasionally, Haddad's worlds cross-pollinate, resulting in dramatic amalgams of his two passions. Broadmoor residents George and Laurie Schuchart contracted Suyama to design their home; Haddad was the project architect. The Schucharts purchased a piece from Haddad's Weapons series that now hangs in prominent view in their award-winning house. "Chris would never talk about his sculpture to promote himself," Schuchart says. Haddad is scrupulously modest and doesn't discuss his artwork without prodding. His clients have discovered his work on their own.

Haddad once casually mentioned that he sculpted with steel; it was such an offhand comment that Schuchart wasn't certain if it was anything more than elaborate tinkering. "Actually, it was a couple of years before we became aware he was an artist," Schuchart says. "Eventually, we saw a display of sculptures at George's office in Belltown; Laurie and I were very drawn to the work. It was only later we learned the work had been designed by Chris."

Some might claim that Haddad's love affair with his artwork is nipping a promising architecture career before it can fully bloom. After all, the elements necessary for Haddad to launch his own practice—technical skill, fluid aesthetic signature, and monkish work ethic—have long been at his disposal. For the time being, though, Haddad believes



**On display** The owners of this Eastside home by Suyama Peterson Deguchi fell in love with Haddad's Totem No. 1 (seen above through the entryway window; sketch far left). The home features the firm's trademark contemporary Pacific Northwest aesthetic and selective natural materials.

the price of establishing a practice is too high. "I definitely have my own ideas and would do things a little differently if it were my office, but you learn a lot working with other good architects. To start my own practice would take over my life; I wouldn't have time to make art, at least for the first few years. Right now, I have a great situation; I can work part time and still maintain my role as a designer, project architect, and associate.

"Money is not my goal," he says. "I want just enough of it to buy the time I need." 🌟

Chris Haddad's sculpture can be seen at [www.chris-haddad.com](http://www.chris-haddad.com).

